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prohibitive construction

construction with the meaning ‘Speaker tells Hearer not to do something’.

Konstruktion zum Ausdruck eines Verbots

Konstruktion mit der Bedeutung ‚Sprecher fordert Hörer dazu auf, etwas nicht zu tun‘.

Examples include *Don’t shout!*, *Don’t shut the door!*, *Don’t be mean!* and *Do not, my friends, consider that all is lost* (last example formal; example from Quirk et al. 1985: 830). Croft/Cruse (2004: 320) draw a distinction between two types of predicates which may be used to form prohibitive constructions: verbal predicates (as in *Don’t jump!*) and non-verbal ones (as in *Don’t be cruel!*). They call the latter “non-verbal” because they describe it as having the form [*Don’t be ADJ*] while the former is described as [*Don’t V*] and is therefore regarded as being verbal. Croft/Cruse correspondingly distinguish between verbal and non-verbal prohibitives. In the latter parts of the early Modern English period, the current form of the non-verbal prohibitive ([*Don’t be ADJ*]) replaced the form [*be not ADJ*] (as in *Be not cruel!*) (cf. *ibid.*).

Croft/Cruse (2004: 320) observe that the non-verbal prohibitive construction [*Don’t be ADJ*] does in fact not fit in with English syntax in general, because (i) a stative predicate normally does not take *do*, and (ii) *do* does not combine with *be* in any other construction, either declarative or (positive) imperative. The relevant constructional paradigm may be represented as follows (cf. *ibid.*):

Predicate Type	Illocutionary Force		
	Declarative	Imperative	Prohibitive
Verbal	He jumped.	Jump!	Don’t jump!
Non-Verbal	He is brave.	Be brave!	Don’t be cruel! < Be not cruel!

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However, the emergence of [*Don’t be ADJ*] realigned the constructional paradigm so that (i) the illocutionary force constructions are more distinct from each other, and (ii) a single illocutionary force type is more uniform. The result of the change from [*Be not ADJ*] to [*Don’t be ADJ*] is, firstly, that the new non-verbal prohibitive construction [*Don’t be ADJ*] is now structurally more different from non-verbal declarative and imperative constructions than the old construction [*Be not ADJ*]. Secondly, however, the new non-verbal prohibitive [*Don’t be ADJ*] is structurally more similar to the verbal prohibitive construction [*Don’t V*]. This means that the change has produced greater similarity within a single illocutionary force type and to greater differences between sentences of the same predicate type. According to Croft/Cruse (2004: 230), this is predicted by the semantic distance hypothesis: differences in predicate type are less relevant than differences in illocutionary force (cf. *ibid.*).

References

- construction (Cognitive Grammar)

Literature

- CROFT, W./ CRUSE, D.A. [2004] Cognitive Linguistics. Cambridge [etc.]
- QUIRK, R./ GREENBAUM, S./ LEECH, G./ SVARTVIK J. [1985] A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language. London